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Can the AU do more to safeguard the Horn of Africa from the fall out of the crises in the Middle East?

As the Horn of Africa gets dangerously entangled in the unfolding crisis between Saudi Arabia (and its allies) and Qatar, this policy brief examines why and how the African Union (AU) needs to pursue the implementation of its security architecture in the coast of greater Horn of Africa. It in particular looks at the case for AU to promote a collective security regime in this part of Africa.

A collective security regime along the coast of the Horn of Africa

Despite the fact that piracy off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Eden wreaked havoc to maritime trade, it attracted little or no consequential policy attention on the part of the African Union (AU) for a long time. Beyond its impact on international maritime commerce, piracy especially in the Gulf of Eden put a spotlight on maritime security as a major area of concern missing from the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA).

The threat posed by piracy in the Gulf of Eden has been a major development that signaled the need for a collective security regime along the coast of Horn of Africa. The recent turmoil in the Middle East and the Gulf countries and its turbulent reverberations in the Horn of Africa have made the need for such a collective security regime in the wider Horn of Africa an imperative and more urgent.

Although Africa as such is never an active player in the recent renewed rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional dominance in the Middle East, the region, particularly the greater Horn of Africa, has been caught up in this feud destabilizing the Arab world. This situation has now reached a critical point following the recently erupted crisis pitting Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies against Qatar. If Africa continues to deal with these unfolding destabilizing geostrategic dynamics in a common policy vacuum and states acting individually, as the trends analyzed below show, it could suffer serious costs.

Middle Eastern crises and the scramble over the Horn of Africa

The turmoil in the Middle East started following the eruption of the so-called Arab uprisings in 2011. However, the Saudi led campaign of mostly Sunni Arab countries to deprive Iran of any allies in the region was the most immediate background to the current tension in the Gulf reverberating across the Horn of Africa. Following the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, Saudi Arabia, prompted by fear of a resurgence of Iranian influence in the region, launched an aggressive campaign both for consolidating its grip in the region and containing Iran.

As part of this endeavor, Saudi and other Gulf States particularly UAE has been nurturing new relationships along the coast of the Horn of Africa, notably with Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan. This consisted of not only initiating and renewing diplomatic and economic engagements with these countries, but also expanding or building new security

presence, particularly in Eritrea and Djibouti (Somaliland). Sudan eagerly welcomed the opportunity for being brought into the Saudi fold and curtailed Iranian presence within its territory. Djibouti and Somalia also broke diplomatic ties with Iran in month 2016.

Eritrea has since 2015 leased the port of Assab to the UAE, which is reportedly building a military base there, providing Eritrea with one of the sources of its [rehabilitation](#) from international isolation. In 2016, the Ambassador of Djibouti in Riyadh announced ongoing discussions with Saudis for signing an agreement for a Saudi military base in Djibouti.

Apart from regionalizing the Syrian conflict, the most destructive war the world witnessed in recent memory, Saudi Arabia's campaign for dominance in the region paved the way for it to mobilize a coalition of Arab and Horn of African countries for launching the ongoing military onslaught in Yemen on the side of the Aden-based government and against the Houthi rebels, suspected of receiving support from Iran. Somalia and Sudan are reported to have sent troops to Yemen as part of the Saudi-led coalition, with Eritrea reportedly deploying 400 troops fighting the Houthis. In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE secured a further concession from Eritrea for allowing the Saudi led coalition access to its territory for attacking the Houthis. Somalia also allowed these countries to use its air space.

These multifaceted renewed security oriented involvements of Middle Eastern countries have started to change the political and security landscape of the Horn of Africa. The developments not only diminished Eritrea's international isolation, they have also substantially improved Eritrea's geo-strategic position in the region, with the country receiving a much-needed financial gain from these changes.

The Horn of Africa suffering the curse of its location

The emerging geo-strategic developments are not without consequences for the security order of the Horn of Africa. Importantly, they seriously affect the character of the Ethiopia-Eritrea impasse that has in many ways influenced the political and security dynamics of the region. While until recently Ethiopia's strategy seemed to have achieved relative success both in reducing the influence of Eritrea in the region and even increased its international isolation, the new developments have laid bare the limits of this strategy. Indeed, recognizing that the policy of containing Eritrea in these changing conditions is proving ineffective, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced in April 2017 that a [new policy](#) is being developed.

There is clearly a lot of money coming from the Gulf States into Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia. For example, money from the Gulf was a major factor in the conduct of the recent parliamentary and presidential 'elections' in Somalia. The impact goes beyond the realm of politics.

In the security realm, the increase in the activities of the Gulf countries is not without its perils. One major concern in this regard is the risk of expansion of Wahhabism in the region and the resultant rise of extremist forms of Islam and the militancy that accompanies it. It would also be difficult to escape the sectarian division between Saudi and its allies on the one hand and Qatar on the other over the Muslim Brotherhood.

Also, the conflict in Yemen seems to have worsened the threat of terrorism along the coast of and in the Horn of Africa region. Owing to this conflict, the hold of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has been strengthened. It is operating in full control of Yemeni ports that trade directly with Somaliland and Puntland.

There is uncertainty surrounding the full ramifications of the expanding engagements of Gulf countries in the Horn of Africa. Obviously, this breeds further mistrust and tension in the region. Even without such divisive external forces in the region, the security and political relationships and alignments in the Horn of Africa are precarious.

The Gulf crisis engulfing the Horn

That the Horn of Africa has become caught up in the dangerous power struggle in the Middle East became clear in the latest destabilizing the intra-GCC crisis. The imposition of a sea, land and air blockade on Qatar, followed by the stipulation of additional burdensome demands, are a clear sign that Saudi Arabia and its allies will never hesitate from using the full force of their power against any one, even a supposedly brotherly country.

It did not take too long before countries in the Horn of Africa were drawn into this crisis. There is neither advance preparations for nor any common strategy in responding to the crisis. Each of the countries of the region has been left to its own individual devices and to respond individually. Unsurprisingly, this has left the Horn of Africa divided rather than coalescing.

Reaction of Horn of African countries

Djibouti, like many countries on the continent that made declarations on the crisis, expressed support to Saudi and its allies. In its ambiguously formulated statement on the crisis, Eritrea also lent support to the measures taken by Saudi Arabia characterizing them as measures necessary for regional peace. Given the nature of the involvement of the UAE and Saudi in Eritrea, Eritrea's position is of little surprise. The same can be said of the position of Djibouti.

Despite a reported offer of \$80 million from the Saudis, Somalia refused to join the Saudi club of countries shunning Qatar and sought to pursue a neutral approach. Yet, in a clear manifestation of a lack of a unified position in Somalia, a member of Somalia Parliament Abdirazaq Osman Hasan "Jurile" [reportedly](#) urged Somalia's government to reverse its decision and side with the Saudis. Although it remains to be seen how this would impact Somalia's relations with the Saudi led anti Qatar block, it is possible that war torn Somalia could be entangled in this crisis with potentially serious consequences.

Sudan, like Somalia, also sought to take a neutral position, rather offering to support the mediation effort. Siding with the Saudi-led anti Qatar coalition would be neither easy nor risk free for Sudan. Qatar hosted the Doha Peace Process for Darfur. It also allocated the sum of US\$ 2 billion to found Darfur Development Bank and has been supporting reconstruction efforts in Darfur, although sustainable peace remains elusive in this part of Sudan.

A more dire fall out for the Horn

Surely, the blockade imposed by Saudi and its allies has dire consequences for Qatar. Yet, thanks to its wealth, Qatar is better placed to manage the consequences. By contrast, the Horn of Africa seems to stand to lose more. This has been born out by the developments on the border between Djibouti and Eritrea, the very first Horn of Africa casualty of the fall out from the Saudi-Qatar crisis.

Qatar, which has maintained 450 peacekeepers on the border between Djibouti and Eritrea as part of its mediation effort for resolving the border dispute between the two countries, withdrew its troops. It did so without any prior warning or consultation with any of the countries. The resulting vacuum has quickly put the two countries on the brink of war. Djibouti reported that Eritrea moved its troops to the disputed Ras Doumeira area. It also put its troops on alert and raised the issue with the AU.

Indicating potential risks of wider regionalization of the crisis, it was reported that Egypt sought to deploy forces to secure the disputed border and fill the void that the departure of Qatari forces left. Given the current dispute among Nile riparian states over the use of the Nile River including the Grand Renaissance Dam Ethiopia is building, such a development would have entangled the Djibouti-Eritrea border with the dispute over the Nile.

Left unattended, this could easily degenerate into armed confrontation with devastating regional and even international consequences. Ethiopia, which uses Djibouti for much of its import and export trade, is unlikely to escape the impact of such confrontation. While it has kept silent on the spat between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Ethiopia issued a statement urging restraint and the need for peaceful resolution of the dispute between the two countries. Various countries with military presence in Djibouti could not either standby and watch. Sources informed Amani Africa that France apparently told the AU that it would move its forces to the area if no action were taken to fill the security vacuum.

AU saving the day?

Alarmed by this development and the grave danger it poses for the region, the AU reacted promptly. AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki issued a [statement](#) urging restraint and initiating a process of deploying a fact-finding mission to the border region. Following receipt of communications from the parties, on 19 June 2017, the UN Security Council (UNSC) also held a briefing session on the situation. Welcoming the AU's plan to deploy the fact-finding mission and calling the parties to resolve their disputes peacefully in accordance with international law, the [UNSC](#) expressed interest to work in coordination with the AU to maintain an atmosphere of calm and restraint.

The Djibouti-Eritrea border may not be the only one to be affected by the Gulf crisis playing out in the Horn of Africa. Given Qatar's role noted above, another peace and security situation in the Horn of Africa that could suffer such blow is Darfur. The tenuous situation in Darfur could indeed suffer further blow if Qatar withdraws its support or chooses to support certain political positions or actors that could escalate tension in the region.

A regional collective security system anchored on the APSA

The countries of the region, rather than being active agents, are put in a reactive mode. As in the past, this is unlikely to bode well for the security situation and to the peoples of the region.

This rivalry, or more accurately scramble, of countries in the Middle East over the Horn of Africa is taking place in a regional policy vacuum for the issues affecting the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region. The countries of the region respond not only on an individual basis but also without regard to or with no appreciation of the dire risks involved. There are no region wide political strategies.

This crisis has shown the limits of the regional grouping, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD). Apart from Eritrea's continued absence from IGAD, Djibouti did not go to IGAD for support.

The events have highlighted the urgent need for AU to initiate a more robust Horn of Africa strategy and for mobilizing cooperation between countries of the region in managing the security of the Red sea and Gulf of Eden region. This has to be done on the basis of facilitating the emergence of a new collective security system that promotes shared, collaborative security in the region and along the Red Sea and Gulf of Eden. Such would be a regional collective security system inclusive of all states concerned and anchored on the principles underpinning the APSA. This would not be completely new to the AU. It is already helping establish such a collective security system in the Sahel region on the basis of what is known as the Nouakchott process.

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